

West Virginia Department of Agriculture

Walt Helmick, Commissioner



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NEWS RELEASE

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COMMISSIONER OF AGRICULTURE LIFTS BAN ON LIVE POULTRY GATHERINGS

Charleston, W.Va. – Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick has lifted his order that banned gatherings of live poultry since mid-May.

The ban was initiated in mid-May in the wake of an avian influenza (AI) outbreak that affected 21 states and 50 million birds. The outbreak eventually became the largest animal health incident in United States history.

Although human health was never at risk, the economic impact of the disease was immense.

“We are still urging all poultry producers to be on high alert for signs of avian influenza in their flocks, whether they have commercial poultry houses or just a small backyard flock,” said Commissioner Helmick.

“The WVDA continues to monitor the animal disease situation at the national and international level on a daily basis and this ban could be imposed again at any time,” he added.

No new cases of AI have been reported since mid-June when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) concluded response actions at affected farms. However, experts think wild birds may continuously carry such viruses and the risk for a reappearance in domesticated fowl is a distinct possibility.

Although West Virginia was not among the states affected earlier this year, its most valuable agriculture sector is commercial poultry. The broiler (meat chicken) industry is centered in the Eastern Panhandle, near the Pilgrim's Pride processing plant in Moorefield. The poultry sector also includes meat turkeys and egg production associated with both types of birds. USDA estimates the combined value at \$355 million. A substantial turkey genetics operation in Greenbrier County is not included in USDA's statistics.

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) tests every commercial flock for AI before they are moved from their houses, ensuring that sick birds are not trucked past other poultry farms in the region.

“We have the staff and equipment to turn samples around within four hours, which is something the industry really appreciates,” said State Veterinarian Dr. Jewell Plumley. Any presumptive positive tests must be confirmed by USDA's National Veterinary Service Laboratory, she noted.

Because they typically roam outdoors, backyard flocks are more likely to come into contact with wild birds that serve as reservoirs for AI viruses. Commercial poultry are housed indoors exclusively, which reduces the chance of coming into contact with wild birds or the waterways they frequent.

Biosecurity practices to prevent the introduction or spread of AI are important to both commercial and backyard poultry farms.

Recommended biosecurity practices include:

- Minimizing farm visitors. AI can survive on vehicle tires, footwear – even in the nasal passages of humans.
- Clean and disinfect shoes, clothes, hands and tires before entering production areas. A squirt of disinfectant is not adequate. Clean all visible dirt before disinfecting to be safe.
- Don't share farm equipment during AI outbreaks.
- Be on the lookout for signs of disease (unusual bird deaths, sneezing, nasal discharge, diarrhea, poor appetite, drop in egg production, purple discoloration of wattles, comb and legs).
- Call the WVDA if you think your birds might be sick. Call the Moorefield office at 304-538-2397 during regular business hours. Call 304-558-2214 and leave a message after regular business hours. More information on poultry biosecurity can be found at https://www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/animal_health/2014/pub_bioguide_poultry_bird.pdf

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